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“TOWARD A NEW MORAL ASSIGNMENT”

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Graduation is always a time of mixed emotions -- of both joy and sadness. There is a feeling of accomplishment and closure -- the end of years of study and hard work, of sacrifices and preparation. And there is also the excitement of anticipation -- the beginning of a new plane of life, the starting of one's career or going on to professional or graduate school. But perhaps more than anything else, college commencement is characterized by hope -- hope for the prospects and possibilities for the future, hope for the accomplishments and goals yet to be achieved or attained, hope in our own intellectual abilities and our willingness to preserve over any obstacles that may confront us, hope in being prepared for any opportunities in the future. At times, hope seems like a huge and heavy half opened door, swinging slowly on rusty hinges, that can be pushed apart only by exerting a tremendous amount effort. The door of hope and opportunity only comes open, through our willingness to struggle, through our personal commitment to excellence.

For people who have experienced discrimination and inequality in American society -- the unfairness of racism and poverty, the prejudices against immigrants who speak different languages, or who have different religious and ethnic backgrounds -- education has always been a way to improve ourselves, to help us push open the door of hope and opportunity.

But increasingly, In our country today, a fundamental debate is being waged over whether the doors of opportunity and equality will be pushed further open, or will be locked shut.

The central issue which defines American society today -- as well as the future politics of the twenty-first century -- is the conflict between the "public" vs. the

“private.” Can the people utilize government as a means to address our major social economic problems? Or should we emphasize market-based initiatives, the private sector, to resolve issues like unemployment and poverty? Nearly every significant policy debate since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 has come down to this question: should the people’s interests or corporate interests be most powerful in determining the future of the country?

The list of examples illustrating the public sector vs. private sector is virtually endless. In health care, for instance, Clinton’s 1994 proposal for managed health care tried to combine limited government mandates with privately run, health provider corporations. Instead of pushing vigorously for the single-payer, comprehensive healthcare system we need, Clinton tried to please private sector interests, and failed.

In public education, a debate is currently waging over the issue of vouchers, and whether parents should be subsidized to send their children to private schools. In public colleges, cutbacks in state and local funding has forced higher tuitions and fees, reducing the access of many racial minorities and working people to higher education.

In the areas of public housing and homelessness, state and city governments are aggressively cutting back funds. Increasingly, politicians argue that government needs to get out of the business of building and managing public housing, and that the private market should determine the quality and availability of housing.

This debate also focuses on issues of criminal justice. We are now spending \$35,000 per year to maintain a prisoner in a minimum security jail cell; it costs nearly \$80,000 per year to confine a prisoner in a maximum security prison. We now have 1.7 million Americans incarcerated across this country. We are building an average of 150 new prison cells **every day**.

We now employ over 350,000 prison guards in the U.S. Your generation must have the courage to ask, "Is this the best use of our financial resources as a society?" Isn't it better to invest in decent housing, elementary and secondary school programs, job training and healthcare, so people feel part of a productive society, rather than on the outside, at the margins? Isn't it better to help people to help themselves, rather than writing off an entire generation of brown, black and poor young people?

What priorities do we have as a country, when we devote billions of dollars to place millions of Americans in prisons and penitentiaries, rather than investing in schools, hospitals, child care centers and improving the environment? Several weeks ago I spent an entire day in Sing Sing prison, giving lectures to prisoners who were enrolled in a professional degree program. I met dozens of bright, intellectual, and hardworking Hispanic, black and poor young men, who want to make a productive contribution to society. But how can we accomplish this, when our priorities are designed not to address our problems, but to warehouse them or ignore them?

It is in the context -- the polarization of wealth and poverty, the cutbacks in government programs, the use of prisons as a means of housing social problems that the status of CUNY and public education in general must be understood.

For oppressed people, education has always been a way to improve ourselves, to move our families and communities forward. My family's history is probably not much different than many of yours. My great-grandfather, Morris Marable, was born a slave before the Civil War. He was sold on a slave auction block in West Point, Georgia, at the age of nine. He was separated from his mother and family. But always as a slave, and later as a freedman after the Civil War, Morris recognized that knowledge was power. He sent his thirteen children to school. As the superintendent of his Sunday school at church, he led his congregation in reading

Biblical scriptures. But my great grandfather, this former slave, never really mastered the skill of reading himself. Knowing each passage by heart, Morris could open the Bible and speak from memory, without knowing individual words. His illiteracy did not stop him from trying to improve his children's lives.

My father, James Marable, served as a sergeant in the racially segregated army air corps in World War II, fighting to defend a democracy that did not include people of color. Through the GI bill, he was able to enroll in Wilberforce College, historically black college in Ohio. But the GI bill did not guarantee him success, it only gave him the opportunity to achieve. My dad went to school full-time in the day, and for years worked the night shift as a maintenance worker in factory. James Marable worked two full-time jobs for nearly two decades, to make sure that his sons and daughter could attend college, and make something more of their lives.

City University of New York was founded on that same principle--that all people, regardless of income, racial background and national origin, could through hard work, make something more of their lives. The entire family of my wife and intellectual partner, Dr. Leith Mullings, Professor of Anthology at the City New York Graduate, has benefited from CUNY. At a time when many universities throughout this country had policies deliberately excluding black students, her mother father, and later all five of their children, completed their undergraduate work at one of the CUNY four year colleges, including Hunter College. My wife's father graduated from Baruch College, one of the first black CPAs in New York State. Her sister Pansy is an assistant commissioner in city government, her sister Pauline is a judge; her sister Sandra is a lawyer and a professor at Baruch. They have all given back in public service to the city. Their accomplishments are due, in part, because CUNY was available to them.

I have related these stories from my own life because they are probably a lot

like your own. The wonderful young women and men who are graduating here today stand on the shoulders of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who sacrificed for their futures. Many of them may not have been able to read or write; many never graduated from high school; but they worked hard all of their lives, with hope that the door of opportunity might be swung open, just a bit more, for those who came after them. For them CUNY was part of the promise of a better life, and building a better world.

Today that promise of opportunity is under attack. For those who claim that by phasing out remedial courses that the educational standards at CUNY will improve, we must assert the truth--that academic excellence can only be found within diversity. The purpose of a public educational institution is to ensure opportunity and fairness to all citizens--not just the rich and the powerful and the privileged. The vast majority of universities and four year colleges across this country offer remedial courses, and no one challenges their commitment to academic standards. The trustees shortsighted and politically motivated decision to weaken CUNY has nothing to do with so-called "academic standards" --it is about pushing back, limiting, denying opportunities and upward mobility to those who have the fewest resources and advantages in our society. There can be no genuine commitment to quality public education, when thousands are unfairly excluded from the outset, There is no fairness when our system of higher education does not yet reflect the rich multicultural, racial, ethnic and gender diversity of this city's and America's people.

How do you achieve change in a democratic society? By recognizing that in a democracy, the majority can be wrong. Only a generation ago, racial segregation was legal in the United States. There were separate and unequal water fountains, public toilets, hotels, restaurants and churches. Birmingham, Alabama's city council even

passed a law making it illegal for blacks and whites to play checkers together! The overwhelming majority of good, middle class whites in Birmingham supported their racist chief of police, Bull Connor, and their pro-segregationist governor, George C. Wallace. But they were wrong. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not say, let us wait until the majority of Southern whites change their minds about segregation. Martin did not counsel patience, or try to moderate his message of "Freedom Now" to read "Freedom Someday."

Several years ago, Proposition 187 was being debated in California, which proposed discriminatory policies against undocumented immigrants, mostly Latino people. A majority of California's registered voters supported this initiative. We must not be afraid to say that the initiative was wrong. Amendment Two was passed in Colorado several years ago, which attempted to outlaw local measures protecting the civil rights of lesbians and gays, the same rights that other Americans take for granted. We should affirm our belief in equal justice for all by saying that the homophobic politics behind that measure was mean-spirited, discriminatory and wrong. We should never be afraid to lose an electoral campaign when we are fighting to affirm democratic rights and equal justice for all.

In a curious way, the conservatives understand this far better than most liberals. You have to be true to your values, because your principles are at the heart of what politics should be. The ideologues of the Far Right, such as Bill Bennett and William Kristol, ground their politics in a set of values. Their only problem is that they've got the wrong set of values.

How do we achieve progressive change? By celebrating our passionate discontent with the way things are. Contented, satisfied people rarely want things to change too much. If you want to find out what new directions history is taking our society, don't wallow in the mainstream--stand at the edge, at the boundaries. Listen

to the poets and the non-conventional music of young people. Learn from those who have little or nothing to lose. Understand the anxiety of the forty million Americans today who lack any medical insurance. Spend time working in a homeless shelter, or walking a picket line with trade unionists. To be passionate discontent is to want our democratic ideals and our egalitarian hopes to be realized in the world around us. It is to challenge conformity, to push the boundaries of "the way things are" to the "way things should be."

To conclude: In a recent conversation with the brilliant actor and advocate of progressive causes, Ossie Davis, we talked about the challenges and problems confronting the African-American community as we enter the twenty-first century. "Every generation needs a moral assignment," Ossie told me. "We have yet to define that moral assignment for ourselves and in our time."

African-American people were challenged 150 years ago by the harsh realities of slavery. The great moral and political questions of that era was the abolition of human bondage. Black abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, pursued a vision of freedom which mobilized the emergence of the black community, north and south. Nearly a century later, the great moral challenge confronting black people was the oppressive reality of Jim Crow segregation. African-Americans were denied access to schools, hospitals, hotels and many other public establishments. The fifteenth Amendment was a dead letter for several generations. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement represented the courageous struggles of a people who yearned to be free.

Now we are in an uncertain time, filled with dangerous and destructive social forces: violence, drugs, unemployment, poverty, social alienation and fear. Our leaders seem unsure of how to articulate a new agenda for progressive change. There are many voices within our communities which call us to turn inward, away

from potential allies with whom we can work to achieve positive change. What is required is the definition of a new moral assignment, a new vision or human emancipation.

We congratulate you today, at this commencement, for your perseverance and sacrifices, for your intellectual accomplishments and your commitment to excellence. You are challenged to use those skills and talents to define a new moral assignment to create a society of greater equality and opportunity for all. A new moral assignment to uproot poverty and homelessness in the next generation. A new moral assignment is needed that says that public higher education must reflect the full cultural diversity of all American people.

We congratulate you, with the full expectation that you will make the difference -- in creating a more democratic and socially just society.